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SUBJECT: CHANGING THE POLITICAL PARADIGM-MUNICIPAL
ASSOCIATION DEFEATS EFFORT TO IMPOSE A PARTISAN DIRECTOR

REF: Tegucigalpa 558

1. SUMMARY: The Honduran Municipal Association (AMHON) preserved its political independence and nonpartisan character by selecting a municipal development professional as Executive Director despite a six month effort by the Minister of Government and dark-side members of Congress to impose a politically beholden Nationalist party member as Executive Director. This come-from-behind victory for the maturing municipal government forces, who were aided by the USG and other international donors, represents an important political counterbalance to the Maduro Administration's now-revealed efforts to reap maximum partisan advantage out of its political decentralization program. It is also a huge step for the good government and anti-corruption forces because the AMHON Board of Directors broke from established political tradition, where decisions are made behind closed doors based on partisan preferences, by using a professional and transparent selection process. This highly atypical selection process for a Honduran institution could serve as a model for other entities, furthering the development of democracy and decentralization in Honduras. END SUMMARY

2. On April 29 the Honduran Municipal Association (AMHON) Board of Directors (composed of 12 Nationalist Party Mayors, 11 Liberal Party Mayors, and one Christian Democrat Mayor,) held a regularly scheduled meeting in Tela where they selected a new Executive Director, Miguel Angel Munguia, to replace the embattled Guadalupe Lopez (reftel). AMHON extended an invitation to international donors to attend the meeting as observers in order to continue to provide independent guarantees of transparency in the finalization of the selection process. A USAID Municipal Development Officer attended, and was accompanied by Alfredo Stein (Swedish aid agency) and Jose Antonio Samperi (Spanish aid agency).

3. The reasoned debate that transpired during the meeting was in stark contrast to previous gatherings during the last four months where emotional partisan squabbles dominated the discussion. Particularly disruptive were the previous provocations by Nationalist Mayors in AHMON to remove the Executive Director (reftel). It appears that this time, the Board's decisions were based on genuine consensus and truly reflected the will of the organization as a whole. (Note: Donors' continued interest and follow-up on this issue, not to mention their presence during the deliberations, were an influence in this outcome. Ambassador Palmer met on a number of occasions separately with the Minister of Government and select groups of mayors to help push this process to its successful resolution. End Note.)

4. Four finalists for the position of Executive Director were presented to the Board of Directors for their decision. Although AHMON's by-laws state that a simple majority can select an Executive Director, the board decided to reach a consensus on the new candidate. (Comment: Throughout the meeting, there were constant mentions of the need for the board to get beyond the partisan positions that had been dividing them in the past; almost a plea to get back to real business. End Comment.)

5. Members of the selection committee reported to the Board of Directors on the interviews that were conducted and all reaffirmed the transparent and professional nature of the selection process, indicating that they learned a great deal by going through this process. Of the four finalists, Miguel Angel Munguia was selected by consensus. Mr. Munguia currently works as a regional coordinator for the Honduran Foundation for Municipal Development (FUNDEMUN). Munguia has a long history of working with municipalities in technical positions and does not have an overt political affiliation. He has a reputation as a solid professional and is well known to Post.

6. COMMENT: In a significant setback for Jorge Ramon Hernandez Alcerro, the Minister of Government, many of the Nationalist Party mayors who had towed the party line in previous meetings have now distanced themselves from him and the other Nationalist Party members of Congress who sought to influence the selection of the new Executive Director.

In conversations both before and after the meeting, it appears a number of Nationalist mayors decided to reject the external partisan manipulation that was being applied to them. Further, it appears that this hiring decision could prove to be an important moment for AMHON's growing political independence in that Nationalist mayors, annoyed by continued pressure from their party, are now willing to stake out positions that are critical, yet constructive, on real issues that are effecting their municipalities.

17. COMMENT CONTINUED: The transparent selection of a new AMHON Executive Director has been a highly atypical process for a Honduran institution. Normally, high-level managerial/ministerial positions are essentially chosen behind closed doors based on partisan preferences by the party holding the majority. AMHON's example may well serve as a model for other Honduran entities to emulate, especially in lieu of the relevance AMHON has for the further development of democracy and decentralization in Honduras. U.S. mission support from the Ambassador to USAID Municipal Development officer provided the critical measure of support needed to overcome the intense political pressure being exerted by Maduro Administration officials and National Congress Members, including the Majority Leader of the Congress and Party Whip. END COMMENT

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